

Straight River



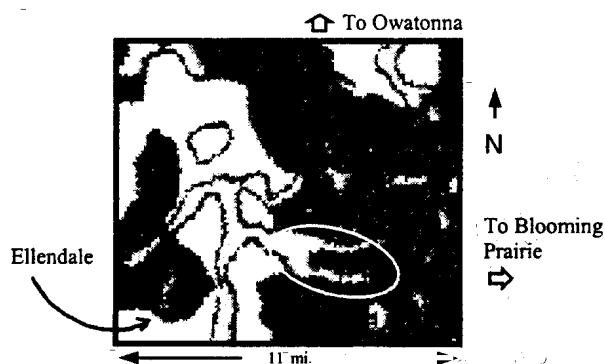
Marsh



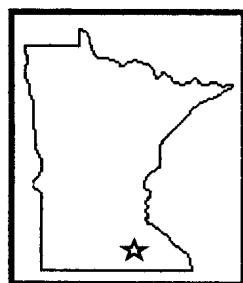
Not So Long Ago...





If we let our imagination free, we can picture ourselves walking in a grassy field with wildflowers and majestic oaks dotting the landscape. As we walk further, it becomes a wet meadow almost a mile wide. Further in yet, we notice that two streams are feeding this marsh from the southeast. Now we stand quietly taking in the landscape and the wildlife appears as if out of thin air. The murmuring voices of the waterfowl are carried to our ears on the warm breeze...

This is a scene from our natural history that may be restored by the owners of the land in an area that we call the **Straight River Marsh**.



STRAIGHT RIVER MARSH, 1854



-  Marsh
-  Prairie
-  Oak savannah (prairie with scattered oaks)
-  Straight River Marsh

About This Project...

The Straight River Marsh restoration project is a voluntary conservation effort involving many partners. The primary funding sources are the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), a federal program authorized in the Farm Bill, and the Reinvest in Minnesota Program. Participating landowners are paid for permanent easements on land that will be restored to wetland or upland (prairie and trees). Landowners who prefer, may sell to the US Fish and Wildlife Service or the MN Department of Natural Resources, if the land meets those agencies' criteria. The MN Department of Transportation has also purchased land where wetlands will be restored to make up for wetlands destroyed elsewhere by highway projects.

Not all of the 22 landowners in the marsh basin have chosen wetland restoration options, but because of the hydrology of the area, shallow wetlands can be re-established on individual tracts without affecting neighboring property. During 1997-98, restoration plans will be written for participating landowners, and drain tile will be broken or rerouted as necessary. If at some future time all the landowners are willing and funding sources can be found, the ditch can be abandoned and the entire wetland restored. Surrounding farms would continue to drain into the wetland basin.

Straight River Marsh project partners: Steele Co. Soil & Water Conservation District, Steele County Board of Commissioners, JD2 Ditch Authority, Cannon River Watershed Partnership, Wetlands Initiative, MN Waterfowl Assoc., River Bend Nature Center, MN Dept. of Natural Resources, MN Pollution Control Agency, US Fish & Wildlife Service, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, Natural Resources Conservation Service.

This brochure was created by the Cannon River Watershed Partnership and River Bend Nature Center. It was funded by Greensource 2020, an educational project funded by the MN Office of Environmental Assistance to help Steele County become a more sustainable community. For more information, call the Steele Co. SWCD at 507-451-6730.

July, 1997

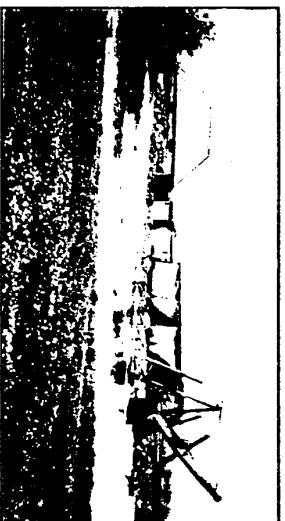
Judicial Ditch 2

The first ditch through the marsh was dug in 1915. Barges were brought in to dredge the channels that ran along the routes of the two streams. These channels connect to JD2, the main ditch that comes from Geneva and drains into the Straight River twelve miles upstream of Owatonna. The part of this ditch system that drains the Straight River Marsh area is known as Lateral 3.

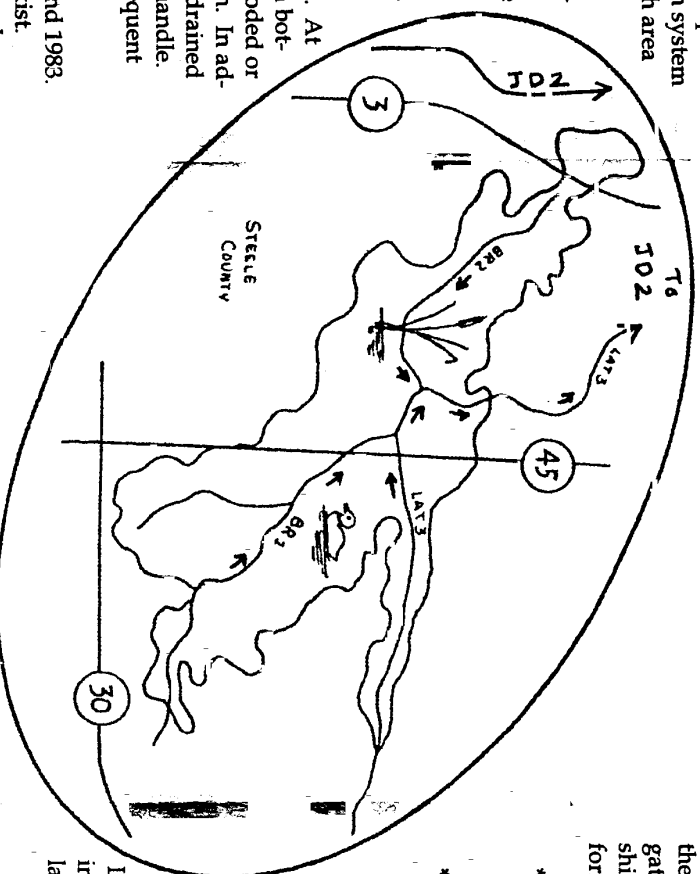
The reason for building a ditch system is to allow farmers to adequately drain their land for pasture and crop production.

Ditch systems have often been a good option for farmers. But in this area the soils are made of peat, which over time disintegrates and causes the level of the fields to sink. At the same time, the level of the ditch bottom is raised due to soil that has eroded or sloughed from the sides of the ditch. In addition, more upland area has been drained into the ditch than the system can handle. All of these factors contribute to frequent flooding in the marsh basin.

Lateral 3 was cleaned out in 1946 and 1983. Unfortunately, the problems still exist. Some farmers have installed dikes and pumps, and many have placed their land in set-aside programs to avoid the risk of farming the wettest areas. In the spring flooding season, the marsh often turns into a temporary lake on which wildlife abounds.



Original ditch being dug by a steam shovel on a barge. Picture from Henry C. Schweiso.



Hopes for the Straight River Marsh

Additional drainage efforts that have been proposed would be expensive and difficult to implement. In 1995, alternate solutions to the drainage problem began to be investigated. The Straight River Marsh partnership evolved and the following goals were formulated:

- * Stabilize flows to prevent downstream flooding and erosion
- * Improve water quality
- * Create and improve quality wildlife habitat
- * Provide alternatives for landowners who do not wish to farm the wet soils

In order to accomplish these goals, funding has been obtained through the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP).

"WETLANDS: no matter where you go in Minnesota, you are probably not far from a wetland, or land that once was wetland. Wetlands fulfill a wide variety of functions. They control floods by slowing runoff and by providing space for water to accumulate during the spring snow melt. They purify water by allowing rainwater and runoff to gradually soak into the ground, entering the ground water only after wetland plants have extracted nutrients and water has passed through many layers of wetland sediments. And they provide a diverse and biologically productive habitat for wildlife, producing as much plant and animal life as a similar-sized area of tropical rain forest.

Char A. Bezanon, School Nature Area Project Site Ecologist